The C in EFL

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ABSTRACT

The current paper extends on the findings outlined in Ward (2017) by extending a discussion into the role of culture in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning and teaching. In particular, this research examines the relationships between self-reports of student engagement with culture generally, with their evaluations of the relevance of doing the same kinds of activities in English to their language learning. Further, the length of time the students have spent studying or living abroad is also examined. The results of the study show that students assigned to higher EFL proficiency level class tend to engage with culture generally more and tend to see doing so in English as beneficial to their studies. Further, these results appear to be related to the length of time students have spent abroad. Finally, the findings of this study are placed into sociological theoretical context.

INTRODUCTION

Is culture important to language learners? As was previously outlined (c.f. Ward, 2017), many theorists argue that learning about culture is important for the mastery of a language in that it helps to facilitate and create the expression of experience, and provides language learners with an objectivized knowledge of the of the imperatives, adiaphora, and exclusives of the language contexts in which language are expected to be deployed (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007; Celce-Murcia, 2007; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1995; Kramsch, 1998, 2010; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). Further, it has also been argued that learning about culture is important as it provides an aestheticized understanding about how language plays out in particular contexts (Bourdieu, 1991; Jenkins, 2002; Ward, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has suggested that cultural engagement is differentially important to language learners based on the broader objectives of their language studies (Horibe, 2008; Kramsch, 1998; Ward, 2013). Further, culture of one form or another is inevitably presented to EFL students, directly or indirectly, through course materials (textbooks, supplementary materials, realia, etc.) or through interactions with teachers, who may often not be of the same cultural background as their students. For example, in the case of the EFL programme from which the participants in this study were drawn from, the textbook used covers a number of cultural issues, including: perceptions of Japanese culture, studying abroad and public behaviour (Brereton, Lesley, Schaefer, & Young, 2017). While such textbooks are not necessarily directed towards intercultural communication, through the use of contexts which students are able to relate to, culture frequently provides a platform for the presentation of target language. Conversely, there are also a number of EFL teaching materials that are specifically geared towards the presentation of intercultural understanding. Such materials not only use culture as a medium for the presentation of target language, but as its substantive core – to specifically help students learn about other cultures (e.g. Shaules, Tsujioka, & Iida, 2004). The presentation of culture in such publications, for perhaps practical reasons, tends to be quite generalizing. Such texts offer students stereotyping predicative cultural tidbits, such as, "…in Japan, people wait in lines for trains, [and] wear masks when they have colds…" (Brereton et al., 2017, p. 89) or "In the Arab world, you eat with your fingers, but never use the left hand." (Shaules et al., 2004, p. 29) These generalizations tend to reflect, in the author's experience, the kinds of ideas students often relay in class, such as, 'Japanese people are

very polite' or 'New Zealanders love rugby'. Whilst it would be easy to characterize the presentation and reproduction of other cultures in this way as culturally insensitive metonymy (c.f. Hume, 1995; Parkes, 1995), they could perhaps be seen more reasonably as *culture for beginners*. All learners need to start somewhere, and as Shaules et al. (2004), point out to their student readers, "Stereotypes are a starting point for the getting-to-know-you process." (2004, p. 41) However, one thing which is quite apparent when examining EFL books that use culture as either a platform for target language or substantively, is that, more often than not, a broad range of cultures are presented within the texts[1].

Regardless of which cultural contexts students are expecting to be able to use English in, this broad range of cultural presentations limits the opportunities for students to put the cultural knowledge that they have acquired into practical use (in the manner outlined in Kramsch, 1998, 2010) or indeed to use culture as a means to getting a 'feel for the game' (as previously adapted from Bourdieu, 1991; Jenkins, 2002). There may be a multiplicity of reasons why EFL publishers take a diverse approach to the presentation of culture. Perhaps, the most practical reason for this approach to culture is to broaden publishers' market segment. Further, doing so may be a circumlocutious way of avoiding the odious charge of native-speakerism. By transubstantiating the role of culture in EFL this way, one might argue that it has become superfluous to the central communicative tenets of second language acquisition (c.f. Horibe, 2008). Taken at face value, one would have to be inclined to agree. There is frequently little in the way of culture knowledge presented in EFL textbooks that could not be gleaned in short time from the Internet, should students need it.

Yet, there may be less obvious, adjunctive pedagogic logic behind the inclusion of a diverse range of cultures in EFL texts: the development in students of a cosmopolitan outlook; and using other cultures as a platform for developing students' self-reflexive and critical thinking skills. In essence, a Eucharistic transformation of the role of culture in EFL has been made, through the implication that cultural knowledge is in-and-of itself socially valuable[2]. Instead of providing students with a strictly practical knowledge of the cultural dos and don'ts of the context where they might need to deploy their language skills, an interesting pedagogical sleight of hand has taken place: culture has been sacralised. Blood has been turned into wine. The locus has been shifted from practical, substantive *culture* to abstract *Culture*[3] as a reasoning fulcrum and symbolic capital.

In order to better understand this, an understanding of the relationship between *Culture*, cosmopolitanism, critical thinking, and the academy is needed. Language, education, and cultural consumption are all overlapping domains which are concerned with the manipulation and exploitation of symbolic resources. Mastery in all three of these fields facilitates social distinction through the accrual of legitimate cultural knowledge, which Bourdieu (1986) refers to as *cultural capital*. *Cultural capital* is primarily acquired and reproduced through familial and scholastic contexts, and is exploited as a marker of social distinction, because it sublimates the conspicuous aspects of economic capital. Yet, cultural competence confers prestige, precisely because of its necessary, albeit indirect relationship to money – it is expensive and time-consuming to acquire[4]

[1] For example in the two texts discussed above, reference is made to cultural gambits from Japan, Australia, America, Polynesia and Germany, among others.

[2] Why exactly this is perceived to be the domain of EFL is unclear. While these kinds of skills are no doubt important, they are not contingent on a second language.

[3] By the introduction of culture with a capital 'c', the emphasis has shifted from culture more generally, to that of *legitimate* culture.

[4] Time itself is an economic index, because it necessitates economic opportunity cost.

(Bourdieu, 1984a).

The same forms of social structuring and reproduction have been observed in the Japanese tertiary education system and are fundamental to the social logic of the kind of liberal arts academy from which the data for this study is drawn (Bourdieu, 1984b; Fukutake, 1989; Hume, 1995; Ishida & Slater, 2010). The secondary and tertiary education sectors both have the capacity to sacralise social distinctions and privilege by imbuing students with culturally valued dispositions, language, and cognitive skills. The kinds of legitimised knowledge acquired in such education systems are oriented precisely towards critical, reflexive and abstract thinking skills, of "analytical thought and elevated language", rather than the practical exigencies of circumstance (Holt, 1998; Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002, p. 111). Learning about other cultures is not just important because it facilitates critical thinking, but also because cosmopolitanism is itself an important aspect of cultural capital (Caldwell & Woodside, 2003; Holt, 1998). In essence, the inclusion of culture in EFL teaching and learning does not appear to be done solely out of the kinds of practical concerns outlined by Kramsch (2010), but perhaps because it is essential for broadening one's horizons, and in the development of a *Cultured* disposition. In order to better understand the role of culture in language acquisition, it may be better to ask, 'How is culture important to language learners?'

To these ends, the current research paper aims to enhance an understanding of the relationship between language learning and cultural engagement by addressing the following questions: What is the relationship between students' general engagement with culture and that with English language-related culture? How do these relate to EFL proficiency and time spent abroad?

METHOD

General Cultural Engagement Practices, English-language Related Cultural Practices and Living/Studying Abroad

In order to assess the inter-relationships of general cultural and English language-related cultural engagement, the students were given a questionnaire asking about talking to people, listening to music, watching television and/or movies and reading. The students were also asked to report the length of time (if at all) they had lived or studied abroad. (Refer to *Appendix*) This questionnaire was administered in both Japanese and English language. For reasons of simplicity, the questions in the instrument are referred to in the following results as *battery item x*, as per the numbered question. For example, question one is referred to as 'battery item one', and so forth.

RESULTS

Sample

567 (243 male, 321 female) first-year university students participated in this study. Data was collected across four university semesters from 2016 to 2018.

Correlations between Variables of Interest

All of the reported data has been rounded to two decimal places. For the purposes of simplicity, the students' self-reported frequencies are examined linearly. However, it is important to note that the timescale which the students were asked to report on is actually exponential[5]. Further, the perceptual linearity of the response levels of the battery items which ask the participants to express the perceived relevance of the different cultural activities to their EFL studies is not assessed in this study. To minimize the effect of this on reliability, the qualifying language used for each level was repeated across the items.

[5] For further detail on this point, refer to Ward (2017).

For each pair of variables, a correlation coefficient was calculated, and these results are reported in *Table 1* below.

Table 1. Self-Reported General Cultural Engagement x Perceived Relevance to EFL Studies.

Cultural Activity	Battery Items	Pearson Correlation
Speaking	1 & 2	($r = 0.424$, $p < 0.01$)
Listening to Music	3 & 4	($r = -0.01$, n.s.)
Watching Movies & Television	5 & 6	($r = -0.06$, n.s)
Reading	7 & 8	($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$)

Cultural Engagement and EFL Proficiency Class Assignment

To refine the above results the data was further qualified by comparing this data with the broad EFL proficiency level of the students. This was done by examining the results according to the TOEIC score ranges used to assign the students to classes. For the purposes of the EFL programme from which the data pool was drawn, the students were assigned to levels four (lowest) to one (highest), according to the classifications in *Table 2* below.

Table 2. Assignment of Students to EFL Proficiency-level Classes

Class Level	TOEIC Range	n
Level 4	< 280	97
Level 3	280 - 479	185
Level 2	480 - 679	139
Level 1	≥ 680	146

To qualify the above findings, a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted using the above-described proficiency classes as grouping variables. In addition to each ANOVA, Tukey HSD *post-hoc* contrasts were also conducted. The results of these analyses are reported in *Table 3* below. For the sake of brevity the Tukey HSD alpha subsets are reported, but not each group mean. For each subset, only the class level contrasts which are statistically significant (indicated by *vs.*) are reported.

Table 3. ANOVA: Class Level x Variables of Interest.

Cultural Activity	Battery Item	F Statistic	Class Level Subsets, $p \leq 0.05$
Speaking	1	($F_{(3,318)} = 10.48$, $p < 0.01$)	4 vs. 2, 1; 3 vs. 1
	2	($F_{(3,300)} = 19.14$, $p < 0.01$)	4,3 vs. 2,1
Listening to Music	3	($F_{(3,323)} = 3.37$, $p < 0.05$)	4 vs. 1
	4	($F_{(3,307)} = 9.83$, $p < 0.01$)	4,3,2 vs. 1
Watching Movies &	5	($F_{(3,319)} = 2.91$, $p < 0.05$)	N/A
Television	6	($F_{(3,309)} = 8.64$, $p < 0.01$)	4,3 vs. 1
Reading	7	($F_{(3,287)} = 4.15$, $p < 0.01$)	4 vs. 3
	8	($F_{(3,275)} = 7.55$, $p < 0.01$)	4 vs. 2, 1; 3 vs. 1
Live/Study Abroad	9	($F_{(3,516)} = 65.84$, $p < 0.01$)	4,3,2 vs. 1

Regarding the strong results for battery item 9: the frequencies decreased approximately linearly

for the students assigned to class levels four to two as the length of stay abroad but not level one. *Table 4* below shows the percentage of students in class levels four to one, according to the reported length of time they have lived or studied abroad.

Table 4. Percentage of Students in each Class Level x Length of Time Spent Abroad.

Class Level	never	≤ 1 month	1 – 3 months	3 – 6 months	6 – 12 months	> 1 year
Level 4	80.72	8.43	3.61	0	0	7.23
Level 3	74.00	16.18	3.00	0	2.31	4.62
Level 2	50.78	31.25	5.47	0	3.13	9.38
Level 1	22.06	19.85	2.21	0	12.50	43.38

To further investigate these relationships, the students' perceived relevance of each English language-related cultural activity was correlated with battery item nine and are reported in *Table 5* below.

Table 5. Perceived Relevance of Cultural Activity to EFL Study x Length of Time Abroad.

Battery Item	Pearson Correlation
2	($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$)
4	($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$)
6	($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$)
8	($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$)

DISCUSSION

The current study has produced a number of interesting results which extend an understanding of the relationship between culture and EFL learning. Firstly, the results of this study indicate that for some kinds of cultural engagement, there are positive and statistically significant relationships between how students engage with these in their day-to-day lives and their perceptions of the usefulness of these activities to their EFL learning. However, the relationship between these variables depends on the nature of the cultural engagement concerned. As was previously argued (c.f. Ward, 2017), EFL student engagement with English language-related activities appears to be more a matter of convenience for at least some of the students, than a concerted effort to engage with aspects of culture related to the language that is being studied. In particular, the results of the current study suggest that the relationship between how students engage with their studies in their day-to-day lives and their perceived relevance of engaging with culture the same way using English depends on the amount of effort required. The results show statistically significant relationships between the general frequency of engagement and the perceived value of doing the same in English to EFL studies for those that require active engagement (speaking and reading) but not those that can be done passively (listening to music and watching movies and/or television[6]). Students who are more inclined to talk to other people and read are also more inclined to view these as useful activities in their language studies. This is not the case for music listening and television and movie watching.

To refine these results, the above described data was compared with the English proficiency level class which the students were assigned to using their matriculation TOEIC scores. However,

[6] In particular, television and/or cinema watching tends to be done with English language subtitles or Japanese soundtracks rather than with English language alone (c.f. Ward, 2017).

the results of these comparisons indicate a somewhat more complex picture of student engagement with culture. In particular, English language proficiency does not appear to be the only variable that interacts with class assignment, in relation to the variables measured in the current study. Specifically, if EFL competence was the only variable which distinguishes the students assigned to each level of proficiency class, then there should be no significant differences on battery items one, three, five and seven. This is clearly not the case.

Firstly, battery item one was intended to measure student self-reports of how often they like to talk to other people. There was no immediately apparent reason to suspect that this is contingent on English language proficiency in-and-of-itself, yet there is a statistically significant and roughly linear progression between ascending proficiency class assignment and self-rated tendency to talk to other people. Students in higher-level classes feel that they are more talkative than those in lower-level ones. This pattern is mirrored in battery item two, by an increased tendency by the students to view talking to other people in English as beneficial to their EFL studies as their proficiency increases. These results corroborate the findings of the pilot study (Ward, 2017), which linked student TOEIC scores teacher observations of EFL oral communication competence. This pattern ties into other studies which suggest cultural competence is linked to discursive verbosity and willingness to voice opinions (Bourdieu, 1984a; Holt, 1998).

Battery item three also showed some interesting, and unexpected results, albeit less clearly than those described above. Again, there was a statistically significant, positive relationship between class assignment and tendency to listen to music generally. However, this distinction was only between those students assigned to the lowest and highest level proficiency classes, suggesting high-level proficiency students are more likely to listen to music than low ones. When correlated, there was no significant linear correlation between items three and four. This appears to be because there is only a significant difference between those students assigned to the highest level and the other three proficiency classes in terms of the perceived value of listening to music to improve EFL proficiency.

Battery item five, whilst showing a statistically significant, and positive relationship between television and movie watching and class assignment, was notably weaker than all the other items. Further, it showed no clear pattern of distinction between the four classes of students. The results for battery item six were clearer, and like items two and four, indicated that, again, students assigned to highest level proficiency classes tended to see watching movies and television in English as beneficial to their EFL studies.

The results for items seven and eight were discernably more mixed than the preceding six. The correlation between these two items was, as mentioned, positive and statistically significant but noticeably weaker than for that of speaking. Further, the ANOVA results were less clear for item seven in that there was only a significant difference between the students assigned to the two lowest proficiency classes but not the two highest and the lowest. Further, although there were significant differences between ascending proficiency classes, these were not linear. This less-than-clear pattern may be partly elucidated by the results of the pilot study (c.f. Ward, 2017), which indicated that students were most likely to read in English from websites and blogs, followed by textbooks. This may mean that the results for items seven and eight, which did not distinguish what the students read, may have been muddled by the distinction between reading for pleasure (as may have been the case for blog and website reading) versus obligation (textbook reading). Preceding research has indicated that reading habits that reproduce the values of the academy tend to co-occur with other indices of cultural competence (Bourdieu, 1984a, 1984b; Holt, 1998). Further investigation to delineate student reading habits may help to clarify the observations made in the current study.

Generally, the results tend to indicate that students in higher level, and more notably highest

level, EFL proficiency classes tend to engage with culture generally, and also tend to view doing so in English as more beneficial to their language studies. However, these results were clearer for some activities (speaking and music listening) than for others (particularly reading). In order to contextualize this in terms of the theoretical position forwarded in the introduction section, it is important to understand the relationships between battery item nine and the broader implications of time spent abroad for student engagement with culture.

The results for item nine were the clearest of all the measurements taken and may help to explain the general tendency for students in higher-proficiency classes to view engaging with culture in English as beneficial to their EFL studies. The F-statistic for item nine was very strong, and the *post hoc* analyses clearly indicate that students assigned to the highest proficiency classes had spent a lot more time abroad than the other three levels. Thus, the results indicate that generally, the longer the students had spent abroad, the more likely they were to view engaging with culture, as it was measured, as being beneficial to their EFL studies. However, while the correlation between speaking and time abroad was medium-strength, its correlation with the other three variables was only mild. For the purposes of the current study, these relationships may have been somewhat attenuated by what appears to be a mixture of linear and curvilinear pattern of results for the amount of time spent abroad for the different English proficiency classes. In particular, for the lowest three classes of students (levels four to two), there is a fairly sharp and linear reduction in the frequency of students reporting the amount of time they had spent abroad: the vast majority of whom had spent less than one month abroad. There is also a clear bifurcation of those students assigned to level one classes. Specifically, it can be seen in *Table 5*, that of the students assigned to level one classes, approximately the same percentage of them had spent less than three months abroad as those who had spent more than one year abroad. This distinction most likely identifies two distinct groups of high EFL proficiency students: those colloquially referred to as *test-takers* and those who are *returnees*.

The time spent abroad by students is an important variable to consider for a variety of reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, there is a clear relationship between time spent abroad and the students' TOEIC scores and class assignment. As such, given their higher level of EFL proficiency, engaging with culture in English is going to be easier for these students, which in-turn quite probably gives them a more positive view of doing so. However, this alone does not explain why they generally report speaking to others more often and listening to music more. Secondly, having spent more time abroad, the students in higher-proficiency classes, through exposure alone, may be more likely to have been enculturated with English language-related culture[7]. Consequently, these students may have already developed a more cosmopolitan outlook.

There are, however, some more subtle, yet perhaps more portentous, implications of battery item nine, and its relationship to the other items in terms of the potential it affords for the accrual of cultural capital. Firstly, cultural capital is an artifact of social reproduction. For young people in particular[8], it is a symbolic capital that is reproduced and acquired in the family setting (Bourdieu, 1984a). The implication of this is that the participants who had spent significant amounts of time abroad, in particular, probably did so because familial enculturation facilitated it. In other words, their parents were probably more inclined to value cosmopolitanism and to think that the benefits of their children spending time abroad outweighed potential shortcomings. Secondly, as outlined in the introduction section to this paper, cultural capital is a valuable form of symbolic capital because is it a subtle index of economic capital. For the purposes of the current

[7] It is important to point out that battery item nine does not ask the students to specify whether they had spent time in English-speaking countries.

[8] Only one of the participants in the study was a mature student.

study, it is not possible to directly assess the differential economic circumstances of students assigned to different proficiency level classes. However, the disproportionate spike in the number of students who have spent extended periods of time abroad assigned to the highest-level class does provide clues to differences in the socioeconomic circumstances of different classes of students. In short, sending one's children to study or live abroad for extended periods of time is very expensive, and doing so presupposes the economic means to do so. Consequently, student assignment to different proficiency level class may differ in some important respects from one another, and this may have implications the role of culture in EFL education. If we are to accept that cultural knowledge is substantively and/or symbolically important to second language acquisition, then it is also important to understand the differential needs of students in this regard depending on their proficiency, previous exposure to culture, and consequent orientation toward culture in general and as a tool for language learning.

CONCLUSION

The results of the current study indicate that EFL proficiency is linked to a number of culture-related variables. There is a general trend towards students assigned to higher-level classes engaging more actively with culture and seeing culture as a useful tool for language learning. However, further research would help to expand the findings of the current research. Specifically, it would be useful to better understand what kinds of materials the students read outside class and how this relates to their perceptions of reading in English to their EFL studies. It would also be good to examine the differences in perceptions of culture of test-takers, to long-term study abroad students and returnees.

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APPENDIX – Student Questionnaire (Japanese translations omitted)

1. Talking to people outside of class time. *Which statement best describes you?*

I avoid talking to other people whenever possible.	I like to talk to my close friends, but I would rather not talk to people who I do not know or do not know well.	I enjoy talking to people, but I feel uncomfortable when talking to people who I do not know.	I enjoy talking to different kinds of people, and like to meet new people.	I love to talk to many different kinds of people, and try to meet new people whenever possible.

2. Talking to people outside of class time in English. *Which statement best describes you?*

I only talk to other people in English when I absolutely have to.	I'm not particularly concerned if talking to other people in English helps to improve my language skills.	I sometimes talk to people in English to improve my language skills.	I talk to people in English because I think is a good way to improve my language skills.	The main reason I talk to people in English is to improve my language skills.

3. How often do you listen to any kind of music?

never	less than once a month	about once a month	about once a week	several times a week	every day

4. Listening to music in English. *Which statement best describes you?*

I enjoy listening to music in any language without necessarily understanding it.	I'm not particularly concerned if listening to music in English helps to improve my language skills.	I sometimes listen to music in English to improve my language skills.	I listen to music in English, because I think it is a good way to improve my language skills.	The main reason I listen to music in English is to improve my language skills.

5. How often do you watch any kind of movies or TV programmes?

never	less than once a month	about once a month	about once a week	several times a week	every day

6. Watching movies or TV programs in English. *Which statement best describes you?*

I only watch movies or TV programs in English because they are not available in my language.	I'm not particularly concerned if watching movies or TV programs in English helps to improve my language skills.	I sometimes watch movies or TV programs in English to improve my language skills.	I watch movies or TV programs in English, because I think it is a good way to improve my language skills.	The main reason I watch movies or TV programs in English is to improve my language skills.

7. How often do you read any kind of non-class related materials such as, novels, websites and blogs, magazines or textbooks?

never	less than once a month	about once a month	about once a week	several times a week	every day

8. Reading non-class related materials in English. *Which statement best describes you?*

I only read non-class-related materials in English, because they are not available in my language.	I'm not particularly concerned if reading non-class-related materials in English helps to improve my language skills.	I sometimes read non-class-related materials in English to improve my language skills.	I read non-class-related materials in English, because I think it is a good way to improve my language skills.	The main reason I read non-class-related materials in English is to improve my language skills.

9. Have you ever lived or studied abroad?

never	for less than one month	for 1-3 months	for 3-6 months	for 6-12 months	for more than one year